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TURGUT OZAL

THESIS

When Turgut Ozal began his political career in 1983 he saw the Turkish economy as the key to entry to the European Community (EC) and expanded Turkish influence on the world stage. As he became enmeshed in the requisites of foreign and domestic affairs, however, he found it increasingly difficult and politically inexpedient to focus on economic issues. He progressively drew away from his agenda and became disenfranchised from his domestic political power base. He failed to complete his goal of EC membership before his death in 1993.

BACKGROUND

By the late 1970s, Turkey was ravaged by terrorists,¹ the national economy was on the ropes, and the incumbent parliamentary government was unable to form a coalition to address solutions, enforce the law, or maintain national confidence.² The Turkish Army, seeing itself as a modernizing and westernizing force in Turkey,³ overthrew the government on the night of 10-11 September 1980⁴ and extended martial law throughout the country⁵. National political parties were abolished⁶ and terrorism was largely erased.⁷

A year before, in November 1979, a relatively minor technocrat, Turgut Ozal, was given the authority to modernize the economy.⁸ Ozal was retained by the military regime after the coup and, following the 1982 rewrite of the Turkish constitution,⁹ became Prime Minister in 1983.¹⁰ He was elected President in 1990¹¹ and served until his death from heart problems on 17 April

1993 at the age of 66.¹²

NATIONAL INTERESTS AND THREATS

Ozal's goal was to increase the prestige and influence of Turkey in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. He saw increased cooperation and trade with all countries of the world¹³ as the means to amplify Turkish power and raise standards of living to be on par with the modern states of Europe. He perceived membership in the European Community (EC) as Turkey's principal midterm objective.¹⁴

Ozal viewed the primary threat to Turkey to be a national malaise, particularly of the domestic economy. He believed that economic non-competitiveness would lead to a continuing downward spiral of influence in the world. The primary internal threat was terrorism and dissension from Kurdish separatists in southeast Turkey. He perceived the primary external threats to be Greece, the Soviet Union, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Bulgaria.

ASSESSMENT OF TURKISH POWER

From the economic perspective, the following quote from Turkey: A Country Study sums up Ozal's plight:

By the late 1970s, Turkey's economy had perhaps reached its worst crisis since the fall of the Ottoman empire. Turkish authorities had failed to adjust to the effects of the sharp increase in world oil prices in 1973 and had financed the resulting balance-of-payments deficits with worker's remittances and short-term loans from abroad. By 1979 inflation had reached triple-digit levels, unemployment had risen to about 15 percent, industry was using only about half of its capacity, and the government was unable to pay even the interest on foreign loans. . . . many observers doubted the ability of Turkish politicians to carry out the needed reforms.¹⁵

From the militarily perspective, the Turkish armed forces, in

1983 numbered about 569,000,¹⁶ the second largest in NATO, after the United States'.¹⁷ The armed forces needed modernization in equipment, tactics, doctrine, and strategy,¹⁸ but were an effective deterrent to hegemony by neighboring states, except the Soviet Union.

Politically, Turkey's governmental structure was unique in that it was the only secular Islamic democracy in the world.¹⁹ The recently-enacted 1982 constitution had increased the power of the president and formally recognized the political parties in the parliamentary process.²⁰ General elections were held in October 1983 and Turgut Ozal formed a one-party government under his leadership.²¹

Turkey's population numbered about 44.7 million in 1980 and increased to 50.7 million by 1985. The annual population growth rate was about 2.5 percent.²² Kurds made up about 12 percent of the population²³ and were mainly concentrated in the southeastern part of the country.²⁴ They comprised the largest ethnic minority and posed a separatist/fundamentalist terrorist threat.²⁵

OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE POWER

Ozal saw opportunities to advance Turkish power in several areas. First, he realized Turkey's tremendous potential for regional economic leadership. Second, Ozal faced a unique opening during the Gulf War to heighten Turkish power and prestige in the international arena. He felt Turkish support to the allied countries would be rewarded by approval to join the EC. The third historically unique opportunity for Turkey was the demise of the

Soviet Union. The loss of such a potentially hostile, yet stabilizing, force on the border was viewed with mixed emotions. NATO's great fear of Soviet use of 3,000 prepositioned tanks and several hundred combat aircraft in Syria²⁶ to spearhead an attack through NATO's southern flank and a drive to ensure access to the Persian Gulf was gone. Opportunities for Turkey to play a larger role in the leadership of the Central Asian region²⁷ were offset by the uncertainty of potential unrest in that same region. Additionally, the threat from Kurdish militants in Iraq, Iran, and southeastern Turkey combined with worries of the acrimony between Armenia and Azerbaijan²⁸ wore on Ozal's mind.

OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES

Ozal believed the key to military and economic issues was success in revamping the economy.²⁹ His plan of action was to continue the economic reform started under the military regime that existed from 1980 to 1982. He reasoned that the domestic economy was the first priority, followed closely by international trade (led by the industrial sector).³⁰ Building on a secure economic base, Ozal believed, Turkey would make itself a strong regional leader.

Turkey's long range foreign policy goals were stated at a conference of Turkish emissaries in 1989: remain in NATO, establish closer ties with the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, take greater action to improve the record on democracy and human rights (chiefly to assuage concerns by EC members), and shift the diplomatic emphasis to threats coming from Iraq and Syria.³¹

TOOLS OF STATECRAFT

ECONOMICS

Ozal's mandate to improve the economy while the government was under Army rule legitimized the drastic actions he took. In the absence of the military's heavy hand, it is doubtful his initial reforms would have been tolerated.³²

Ozal's domestic economic strategy was designed to open the Turkish economy to world markets.³³ He implemented a comprehensive package of modifications: devaluated the Turkish lira, inaugurated flexible exchange rates, maintained positive real interest rates, tightened control of money supply and credit, eliminated most subsidies, freed prices charged by state enterprises, reformed the tax system, and motivated foreign investment.³⁴ As a result, Turkey was again able to borrow in international capital markets and continue its economic growth.³⁵ Exports and imports increased dramatically in the ensuing years, the deficit on the current account was cut by nearly one-third (finally allowing Turkey to service its external debt), and GNP grew by an average of 8 percent between 1979 and 1989.³⁶ However, the economic recovery did not overcome inflation and unemployment. They remain serious problems to this day.³⁷ The haste to modernize the economy resulted in huge budgetary deficits and led to inflation rates of 75 percent; as a result, economic growth began to slow.³⁸

In a 1989 interview, Ozal stated:

The biggest change we've made is in economic thinking. . . . We've transformed ourselves from an agriculturally based to an industrially based economy in eight years. It took the West fifty to a hundred years to do it. . . .

. The hard fact is that sacrifice goes along with economic development, and our sacrifice comes in inflation.³⁹

In spite of the increasing economic strength of the country, the December 18, 1989 caucus of the European Community Commission denied Turkey membership in the EC.⁴⁰ Chief issues were the size of the country (larger than any EC member state), low per capita purchasing power (one-third that of the EC average), high inflation rates, high unemployment,⁴¹ and population growth (by the end of century larger than any country now in the EC).⁴² Additionally, Turkey's economy was not ready to begin the "harmonization process" inherent in EC membership. In Turkey's economy, the state played such an important role that it was "incompatible with integration in an economic community consisting of much more liberal political economies."⁴³

DIPLOMACY

Bruce R. Kuniholm states in his article "Turkey and the West," "Turkey is cognizant of its vulnerability to both East and West, sensitive to the capricious character of its relations with them and aware of the necessity of walking a delicate line between power blocs and cultures."⁴⁴

For instance, Turkey walked a tightrope between Iran and Iraq during the prolonged Iran-Iraq war.⁴⁵ Examples of Turkey's direct involvement in conflicts with neighbors included: Bulgaria over the Turkish ethnic minority;⁴⁶ Greece over Cyprus,⁴⁷ the continental shelf in the Aegean, several islands, and contested oil exploration;⁴⁸ Syria over support for Kurds and Armenian terrorist

groups;⁴⁹ Iran over support for Islamic issues and export of the revolution;⁵⁰ Iraq over control of the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq;⁵¹ and Iraq and Syria over water rights and the volume of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.⁵²

In the Gulf War, Ozal viewed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait as contrary to international norms of behavior and tenets of the UN Charter.⁵³ Even though he allowed coalition forces the use of Turkish installations, Ozal vowed he would not attack Iraq unless Turkey was attacked.⁵⁴ Thus, he maintained the moral high ground and advanced Turkish regional leadership with a minimum of adverse domestic political reaction.

As part of the design to improve relations with the Russian successor states and Balkan nations, Ozal welcomed Russia and seven other former USSR neighbors in a new Black Sea economic cooperation accord.⁵⁵ As an additional gesture of good will, Ozal took in 1,000 university students from each of the six former Soviet Central Asia republics, and trained bankers, diplomats, and several military officers⁵⁶ in the techniques of Turkish success.

As Ozal's recent trip to the Balkan states and the appointment of a Turkish general officer to command the UN force in Somalia indicate, Turkey is taking a more prominent role in the region⁵⁷ and the world.

FORCE/COLLECTIVE SECURITY

Turkey has been a full member of NATO since 1952⁵⁸ and has long allowed the United States to operate key airbases and communications sites within its borders.

During the Gulf War, Turkey was one of the first to come to the aid of the United States and the UN coalition in "a politically calculated move that went beyond immediate national security concerns."⁵⁹ The expected payback was support for EC membership, increased military aid, and greater access to U.S. food and textile markets.⁶⁰ Assistance to the UN coalition exposed Turkey to external attack and inflamed domestic opposition parties who felt Turkish involvement was too pro-coalition.⁶¹ Turkey lost over \$2 billion in revenue in the first three months of the crisis⁶² but is scheduled to receive an estimated \$8 billion in arms from the United States and Germany; \$2.2 billion in oil, grants and loans from Arab countries, France, the EC, and Japan; and the annual U.S. security assistance package was increased to \$635.4 million, a 15 percent hike.⁶³

In Kuniholm's words:

To be sure, a more cautious role in the allied coalition would not have earned Turkey the same measure of respect from its allies, and it would not have given the Turks as many real and potential benefits. . . . one deserving a seat at whatever peace conferences take place in the postwar era; and the gratitude of its allies -- the most clear expression of which would be admission to the EC. ⁶⁴

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Ozal best used the news media in his pursuit to marshal international forces to help fight the Islamic terrorist threat. He granted scores of interviews to all manner of reporters and treated them to such apocalyptic tones as "President Ozal has warned that rejection [of EC membership] would push Turkey away

from Europe and encourage the spread of religious fundamentalism throughout the region"⁶⁵ and "The global conflict between communism and capitalism will be replaced by global religious conflict. If we all handle these crises wrong, that conflict could be Islam versus Christianity. We have to avoid that."⁶⁶

DOMESTIC SUPPORT

When Ozal first won the prime ministership in 1989, with 36 percent of the popular vote,⁶⁷ he had already reached the pinnacle of popular support. It was downhill from there. Despite being the first political figure ". . . in Turkey to master the art of communicating on television,"⁶⁸ Ozal struggled to sustain a government. The actions he took were invariably controversial, and yet were invariably best for Turkey. However, they cost Ozal dearly in terms of public support.

The low water mark of Ozal's popularity was just before and during the Gulf War. Turkey's Chief of the General Staff, Defense Minister, and Foreign Minister all resigned in protest of Ozal's get-involved Persian Gulf policy, prior to the war. At the time, newspaper polls showed that two-thirds of the country opposed a war against Iraq.⁶⁹

Ozal felt the greater good would be served by active Turkish involvement on the side of the UN coalition. He was proved correct, later:

Demonstrating political skills he has shown repeatedly in the past decade, Ozal outmaneuvered opposition leaders who initially criticized his move to allow U.S. warplanes to use Turkish bases . . . the Turkish president has gained grudging, if not active, support from the press, public, and military and foreign policy

establishment.⁷⁰

The other major domestic issue that Ozal confronted was the issue of Kurdish independence. The official position on the Kurds was to treat them as a non-minority for fear of threatening Turkey's claim to southeastern Turkey.⁷¹ Of all the domestic decisions he made, this was the worst -- the Kurdish "problem" was allowed to fester until it grew to monumental proportions, and still remains unresolved.

COVERT ACTION/CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS

Ozal used covert action or, at a minimum, mislead the press regarding his views on keeping Saddam Hussein in power immediately after the cease-fire for the Gulf War. In an article published in the Washington Post in March 1991, Ozal was portrayed as arguing against the removal of Saddam Hussein: ". . . Turkey's President Turgut Ozal argued persuasively here last weekend that, for the short term, a stabilized Iraq under Saddam is far preferable to a chaotic Iraq without him."⁷² In a Washington Post article dated 4 February 1993, the former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Morton Abramowitz, "disclosed" that Ozal urged President Bush, in the closing days of the Gulf war, to topple Saddam from power rather than leave him in place to do more harm.⁷³ Ozal wanted to appear to the Turkish public as a moderating influence regarding Saddam's fate -- particularly if Saddam were overthrown or killed. In that case, Ozal would have been on record as proposing one action while, in fact, working for it's antithesis.

CONCLUSION

Turgut Ozal overcame most of the obstacles placed before him as Prime Minister and President. His impact on Turkey and international events was monumental. However, he became enmeshed in the requirements to spread his personal influence too wide and fell victim to public opinion and disenfranchised power base. He successfully used crises to advance his international position, unfortunately, it was at the expense of his domestic support.

APPLICATION TO AMERICAN STATECRAFT

The role of the political leader is not an easy one. Political leaders must be cognizant of their domestic, as well as international, sources of power. Events can overtake any leader at any given time; the determining factor in a leader's success might well be the degree of domestic support he develops in his constituency.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Pitman, Paul M. III, ed. Turkey, a Country Study. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1988: 79-80. As many as 2,000 people may have died in the political violence from 1978-1979. By mid-1980, the death rate increased to twenty or more per day.

² Pitman, 81.

³ Milton Viorst, "Crossing the Straits," The New Yorker June 5, 1989: 63-64. The author cites a professor of history at the University of the Bosphorus and his colleagues and states that the Turkish Army has become ". . . the nation's intelligentsia and its political conscience -- a development that contrasts strongly with the Western experience." Also "The consensus seemed to be that the Turkish people have more confidence in the Army, as an institution responsible for the nation's well-being, than they do in the government." For a more detailed background on the historical role of the military in Turkish politics, see Frank Tachau, Turkey--the politics of Authority, Democracy, and Development. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984. pp. 76-83. and Metin Heper and Ahmet Evin, ed., State, Democracy and the Military Turkey in the 1980s. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1988.

⁴ Pitman, 81.

⁵ Pitman, 82.

⁶ Pitman, 82.

⁷ Viorst, 64. Though terrorism was thankfully stopped, the speed and apparent ease with which the Army accomplished it leads to the conclusion that the Army could have stopped the violence earlier, if it had a mind to.

⁸ Pitman, 79.

⁹ Pitman, 83.

¹⁰ Viorst, 48.

¹¹ Mehmet Ali Kislali and James Wild. "Losing a Staunch Friend." Time 4 Nov. 1991: 45.

¹² "Newsmakers." Newsweek 26 Apr. 1993: 72.

¹³ Anonymous. "Interview: Turgut Ozal. Bold Moves in Turkey." Defense & Foreign Affairs Nov. 1984: 19+.

¹⁴ Viorst, 44.

¹⁵ Pitman, 171.

¹⁶ Anonymous. "Turkey: a Reference Report." Defense & Foreign Affairs Nov. 1984: 16.

¹⁷ Gregory Copley. "Turkey's Bold New Strategic Initiative." Defense & Foreign Affairs Nov. 1984: 9-12.

¹⁸ Copley, 10. Copley lists nine major defense equipment concerns of Turkey in 1984: "1. Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) protection is non-existent for Turkish forces.
2. Very few anti-tank guided weapons are in service.
3. Artillery is completely outgunned by the bloc forces, both with regard to range and mobility.
4. Mobility is in extremely poor shape.
5. Night vision equipment. There is none in service, and night exercises are virtually unknown despite the fact that the Soviets have doctrinally geared for a day/night war.
6. Command, control, communications and intelligence are very poor all-round. Particularly lacking are battlefield sensors as a starting point.
7. Air defense weapons systems are poor but improving (British Aerospace 'Rapier' has been ordered).
8. Lack of doctrine development organization, and a command structure not conducive to modern demands.
9. Lack of funds to remedy any of the above."

¹⁹ Kuniholm, Bruce R. "Turkey and the West." Foreign Affairs Spring 1991: 34.

²⁰ Pitman, 83.

²¹ Pitman, 6.

²² Pitman, 378.

²³ "Turkey: Reference Report", 14.

²⁴ Pitman, 110.

²⁵ Kuniholm, 44.

²⁶ Copley, 10.

²⁷ Jonathan C. Randal. "Turks Rethinking International Role." Washington Post 24 Feb. 1993: A15.

²⁸ Gerard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau, Strategic Atlas (Third Edition) New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992: 102.

²⁹ Copley, 10. "Much of Turkey's ability to overcome its immediate military and economic problems (and the military problems can be largely addressed if the economic situation continues to improve) is linked to the success of Prime Minister Ozal."

³⁰ Pitman, 206.

³¹ Kuniholm, 40.

³² Viorst, 48.

³³ Pitman, 171.

³⁴ Pitman, 172.

³⁵ Pitman, 172.

³⁶ Viorst, 46.

³⁷ Pitman, 172.

³⁸ Viorst, 48.

³⁹ Viorst, 71.

⁴⁰ Kuniholm, 41.

⁴¹ Kuniholm, 41.

⁴² Viorst, 46.

⁴³ Pitman, 236. The author's point is that the government's heavy role conflicts with a "pure" market economy.

⁴⁴ Kuniholm, 48.

⁴⁵ Copley, 10.

⁴⁶ Pitman, 299.

⁴⁷ Pitman, 300.

⁴⁸ Pitman, 301.

⁴⁹ Pitman, 283.

⁵⁰ Pitman, 282.

⁵¹ Kuniholm, 46.

⁵² Kuniholm, 46. Also see Joseph R. Gregory, "Liquid Asset." World Monitor Nov. 1991: 28.

⁵³ Kuniholm, 46.

⁵⁴ Kuniholm, 47.

⁵⁵ Jonathan C. Randal. "Turkey Woos Its Ex-Communist Neighbors." Washington Post 4 Feb. 1992: A10.

⁵⁶ Randal, "Turkey Woos Its Ex-Communist Neighbors.", A10.

⁵⁷ Jonathan C. Randal. "Turks Rethinking International Role." Washington Post 24 Feb. 1993: A15.

⁵⁸ "Turkey: Reference Report.", 12.

⁵⁹ Kuniholm, 35.

⁶⁰ Kuniholm, 35.

⁶¹ Kuniholm, 36.

⁶² Kuniholm, 37.

⁶³ Kuniholm, 38.

⁶⁴ Kuniholm, 47.

⁶⁵ Kuniholm, 42,43.

⁶⁶ Jim Hoagland. "Ozal's Words to the Wise." Washington Post 4 Feb. 1993: A21.

⁶⁷ Thomas Goltz. "Turkey's Ozal Voted President Amid Dispute." Washington Post 1 Nov. 1989: A37.

⁶⁸ Viorst, 48.

⁶⁹ "Official Quits in Turkey Over Crisis." Washington Post 4 Dec. 1990: A31.

⁷⁰ Jonathan C. Randal. "Turkish Leader Bolstered by Role in Gulf Conflict." Washington Post 3 Mar. 1991: A24.

⁷¹ Kuniholm, 44. The Kurds are officially a non-minority in Turkey. "The official Turkish position has been to deny the legitimacy of a separate Kurdish identity because the political implications of doing so could threaten Turkey's claim to and control over southeastern Turkey." The harsh military treatment of the Kurds is one of the most widespread complaints from the European Community, proclaimed from a human rights viewpoint. For a more detailed discussion on human rights in Turkey, see Ergun Ozbudun, ed., Perspectives on Democracy in Turkey. Ankara: Turkish Political Science Association, 1988: 193-209. Other examples of the non-recognition policy are Israel's view of the PLO (until recently) and the view of insurgents held by international organizations. See Jarat Chopra and Thomas G. Weiss, "Sovereignty is No Longer Sacrosanct: Codifying Humanitarian Intervention,"